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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002541

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY OBSERVERS DISCUSS
NATURE OF SOUTHERN TROUBLES

REF: (A) BANGKOK 2401 (B) BANGKOK 2322 (C) BANGKOK
1008 (D) 04 BANGKOK 8377 (E) 04 BANGKOK
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Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke. Reason 1.4 (d)

1. (S) Summary: In recent Embassy meetings with several Thai government and academic experts on Thailand's southern separatist troubles, several themes emerged: 1) the Royal Thai Government (RTG) sparked deep resentment and lost credibility among Muslims in the South after detainees taken at Tak Bai died while being transported for further interrogation; 2) the degree to which assistance from outside Thailand to local separatists remains unknown; and, 3) there is real concern about the possibility that international extremist groups could be tempted into active involvement in the South. End Summary.

ATTACKS ON APRIL 3 SUGGEST NO LETUP IN VIOLENCE DESPITE
CONCILIATORY LANGUAGE FROM THAKSIN

2. (C) On April 5, Poloffs interviewed Dr. Surasit Vajirakachorn, Associate Dean at the National Institute of Development Administration and a lecturer on southern Thai developments, about the South. Surasit characterized the April 3 bombings at Hat Yai Airport and in Songkhla (Ref. A) as "demonstrations" by militant separatists that their campaign against the government and the economies of the southern provinces would not let up, even as Prime Minister Thaksin directs a major shift to a more conciliatory southern policy. Surasit estimated that the separatist movement in the south has grown to about 10,000 members of which about half are armed fighters. (Note: This estimate was offered by the professor, but it is by far the highest we have heard. 3000 is the more common total heard. End note). Surasit told poloffs that before the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Center (SBPAC) and the Civilian-Police-Military Task Force 43 were dismantled by PM Thaksin in Spring 2002, there were no more than 1000 active separatists. He dated the separatist growth spurt from the shutting down of these two organizations, with the numbers boosted further after the Krue Se Mosque incident, the Tak Bai incident and the arrests of religious teachers from the Thamma Witthaya religious schools.

3. (C) Poloffs and a Washington visitor also spoke March 16 with General Surapong Suwana-adth of the Royal Thai Army Headquarters Directorate of Intelligence (who is slated shortly to become Chief of Intelligence at Supreme Command) and Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, political science professor at Chulalongkorn University and prominent expert on defense and security issues about the South. They also attributed the recent up-tick in violence in the South to the killings of Thai Muslims by RTG security personnel last year. Surapong and Panitan said that the majority of the victims (over half) were civilians (they did not include the Krue Se-related attacks or Tak Bai casualties in their statistics, which would have pushed their estimated percentage of civilian deaths considerably higher). They added that it appears that the attackers are employing tactics that vary by district - in some districts, drive by shooting or machete attacks are most common; in others bombings and in others arson. There is no discernible pattern. Surasit opined that use of cell phone detonated improvised explosive devices could indicate expertise learned from abroad, but wouldn't hazard a guess about from specifically where.

4. (C) Surapong said that in the struggle for "hearts and minds," Tak Bai dealt a severe blow to the RTG's image and was a setback to the government's efforts to calm the situation in the Muslim border provinces. As a result, the security forces are looking again at their (lack of) training in riot control, Surapong said. In his view, security forces might be able to improve the volume and quality of information from civilian informants in order to be more "surgical" in apprehending separatists. He said there would be better use of information, noting that a new "development-based" Army unit, the 15th Division, is slated for deployment to the south and should buttress efforts to win hearts and minds. (Note: After Thaksin's comments (Ref. B) during last week's parliamentary debate on the south that troops would less visible in some areas in the region, it is not clear whether the 15th Division will actually be deployed. End Note.)

15. (SBU) In Poloffs' meetings, Surapong, Panitan and Surasit all noted that there have been no separatist-related incidents in another Muslim-majority border province, Satun. They each speculated that separatists, anxious not to draw attention by security forces to smuggling activities that may be funding their activities, avoid attacks on government and civilian targets in that province.

DEFACTO SEPARATION IN THAI BUDDHIST RURAL FLIGHT?

16. (C) Many Thai Buddhists living in the southern provinces are relocating to safer, more urban locales in the region, according to Dr. Panitan. He said that the flight could either be from perceptions of a deliberate campaign by separatists to create a defacto separate Muslim area in the deep South, or simply a derivative of the general violence. Panitan claimed that roughly 100,000 Buddhist residents of Narathiwat, and 300,000 from Yala and Pattani, have moved, most leaving rural businesses or residences overnight (or for longer periods) to stay in Songkhla or Hat Yai, where security is deemed to be better. Government figures for those who have moved out of fear of the violence is lower -- about 20,000. (Note: Panitan's figures and anecdotal comments about non-Muslims fleeing troubled areas in the south match those of other observers. Reftels C, D, and E. End Note.) Panitan added that suspicion between the Thai Muslim and Buddhist communities is growing. Buddhist businessmen carry guns when traveling in the afflicted provinces and in their places of businesses. Some are taking target practice and hiring security guards.

ROYAL FAMILY MEMBERS AT RISK?

17. (S) Panitan claimed that Thai officials are concerned about recent unspecified threats originating in the south to the Royal Family members. Panitan declined to give additional information, but said that there is genuine concern that some separatists may intend to target a member of the royal family during a royal visit to the affected provinces.

OUTSIDE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE POSSIBLE BUT DEGREE UNKNOWN

18. (C) Panitan said that there is ample visible evidence that unaccounted funding is coming in to the deep South from outside. As an example, he cited the case of local Islamic teachers, many of whom had attended religious schools in the Middle East and returned to Thailand, having relatively prosperous looking homes, "complete with a big satellite dish to pick up al-Jazeera" but with no evidence of income to support their house and other possessions. Surasit said that there is, in his opinion, assistance from "across the border," (i.e. Malaysia), particularly in providing refuge for separatists skipping across the border to evade Thai authorities. Colonel Surapong said that the outside funding question is very worrying and one that Thai authorities are trying to get a handle on, particularly the activities of the International Islamic Relief Organization.

MOVEMENT OF DUAL NATIONAL DIFFICULT TO TRACK

19. (C) Panitan said that the RTG does not have firm and effective control over movement of Thai or dual national Muslims across the border. Surapong claimed that some separatist suspects the authorities are seeking are hiding in rural areas, some just across the border in Malaysia. Panitan characterized relations between Thai and Malaysian law enforcement and border police as good; strains between the two neighbors' security services exist at higher ranks. (Note: Embassies Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur have heard similar comments from both Thai and Malaysian border officials. Reftels D and F. End note.)

FEAR THAT INTERNATIONAL TERRORISTS COULD BE TEMPTED TO BECOME INVOLVED

110. (C) On the question of whether the separatists would welcome Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) assistance, Surapong opined that some would value JI expertise but not the international attention this would draw to them. He said that JI had used Thailand as a sanctuary in the past but, citing the example of Hambali, noted that the JI leader had kept himself isolated from mainstream Thai Muslims. In an aside, Panitan and Surapong both agreed there was a general separation between Wahabi/Sufi influenced Muslims and the majority of southern Thai Muslims, who rejected global jihadism. Surasit said that the possibility of an international terrorist group insinuating itself into the conflict is his greatest worry.

111. (C) Comment: These conversations with three "authoritative" Thai observers demonstrate again that Thai experts really are unable to put a name on or identify the persons or organizations responsible for bomb attacks such as those occurring in Songkhla province on April 3. Another thread running through the discussions with Panitan, Surapong and Surasit was the frequent assertion that dismantling the

joint civilian/military bodies several years ago, and adoption of overly hard-line tactics against the separatists, cost the RTG a significant degree of support among Muslims in the southern border provinces and tipped the balance, leading to the current woes. Of concern are the continued reports that non-Muslim Thais in the south, out of fear and intimidation, are relocating away from the troubled areas.

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